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ROCHAMBEAU: AN APPRECIATION

BY G. P. BISHOP

“ IN FRANCE,” wrote Segur, “ The cause of the American insurgents excited the interest of all. From every side public opinion was pressing the royal Government to declare itself in favor of Republican Liberty! ” Thus influenced, the French decided that aid must be sent across the seas and a man found capable of rendering that help—a leader not only trained as a soldier, but a man of great tact and decision; willing to accept Washington as his superior officer and make allowances for an ally ill prepared. Happily for us, Louis XVI summoned to Versailles Jean Baptiste Rochambeau, a great soldier, and a great man in character and understanding.

Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Marshal Count de Rochambeau, was born in 1725 at Vendome. He studied for the priesthood, but at the age of sixteen decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a soldier. Through his long military discipline and varied experience in the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War were developed those traits that made him an invaluable ally. In 1780 he was made Lieutenant General by his King to lead 6,000 troops in allied support of the American patriots in their fight for liberty.

Ordered to leave his home and France, a man of fifty-five (he was Washington’s senior by seven years), to fight in a country practically unknown, by the side of men not less so, speaking an unknown tongue: these were some of the ordeals to which Rochambeau summoned his forces of will power and wisdom.

After seventy days at sea (longer than the voyage of Columbus) Newport Harbor was reached. A welcome of thirteen grand rockets was fired in his honor. But Rocham-

beau realized that he faced the task of overcoming a natural prejudice against foreign troops, whose national frivolity was widely assumed. Before the coming of his troops the isolated Colonists' imagination pictured the French "as a kind of light, brittle, queer-shaped mechanisms, only busy frizzling their hair and painting their faces, without faith or morals." After the war, in harmony with many other tributes from different States offered to Rochambeau, the Maryland Assembly remembered these prejudices, and to make amends declared that "to preserve in troops far removed from their own country the strictest discipline, and to convert into esteem and affection *deep and ancient prejudices*, was reserved for you."

To Rochambeau's inspiring help we may attribute the final success of the Siege of Yorktown. And on his departure from the United Thirteen States in the Autumn of 1782 all those States vied in showing him honor. May we be allowed to join with those of William and Mary College, who saluting Rochambeau, said: "You have reaped the noblest laurels that Victory can bestow, and it is perhaps not an inferior triumph to have obtained the sincere affection of a grateful people."

On his return to France the King, as well as his country, prepared to do him honor. The first boon that Rochambeau asked of Louis was to divide these honors of victory with the unfortunate Admiral de Grasse, who, after his successful encounter in Chesapeake Bay, had been taken prisoner by the English. Rochambeau himself was given the order of Saint Esprit and appointed Governor of Picardy. Napoleon, recognizing the greatness of the old soldier, made him a Grand Officer in the Legion of Honor.

In one of his letters Rochambeau wrote Washington: "At last I am to enjoy philosophical quiet in the shade of my own laurel tree." There, at the age of eighty-two, having known both the glories of war and the blessings of peace, the old soldier died. But we have learned that his spirit and its ever quickening power is still alive in France.

G. P. BISHOP.